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ABSTRACT

State-mandated testing programs have been in place in New Jersey since the 1976-77 school year. In 1989, the current test was replaced with two new testing programs, the Eighth Grade Early Warning Test (EWT) and the Eleventh Grade High School Proficiency Test (HSPT11). This paper follows the Trenton (New Jersey) Central High School Class of 1995, the first to graduate under HSPT11 standards, to provide baseline information for further studies and to help evaluate the EWT as a warning of academic failure. In the spring of 1991 there were 732 regularly enrolled eighth graders were took the EWT. In the eleventh grade, 410 regularly enrolled students were tested. Of these, 266 had taken the EWT in 1991, and 182 of them passed the HSPT11. The school graduated 295 seniors in 1995, and of these 295, only 237 were among the 732 tested in eighth grade in 1991. Results show that 466 (63.7%) left the district before taking the HSPT11. Results do show a direct link between success on the EWT and the ability to pass the HSPT11, but they also indicate that it may not be appropriate to draw such comparisons, since most students who took the EWT did not make it to graduation in Trenton and probably not even in the state of New Jersey. (Contains five figures and seven tables.) (SLD)

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High Stakes Testing in an Urban School District:

Survivors of the Class of 1995 from Grade Eight to Graduation

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Data for this paper were collected while the author was Director of Planning, Research and Special Projects for the Trenton Public Schools

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High Stakes Testing

A state mandated testing program in New Jersey has been in place since the 1976-1977 school year. Initially, minimum basic reading and mathematics skills for students in grades three, six, nine and eleven were tested. These tests were designed to determine a student's eligibility for compensatory education. Revisions in the testing program occurred in 1986, 1990 and again during the 1993-1994 school year. Since 1990, the focus has changed. The State's testing program has evolved into one of high stakes for students as well as school districts. Students are now tested on higher order skills in the areas of reading and mathematics as well as a holistically scored writing sample. And students are unable to graduate with a state endorsed high school diploma unless they pass all three portions of the test. The increasing degree of difficulty of New Jersey's mandated testing program paralleled (and in several cases was out in front of) the national movement generated by "A Nation at Risk," N.C.T.M. and N.C.T.E. standards and the like.

The State Department of Education eliminated the Minimum Basic Skills Test (MBST) in favor of the more rigorous ninth grade High School Proficiency Test (HSPT9) in April 1986. All ninth graders were required to pass the HSPT9 in order to graduate. Students could re-take any failed section of the HSPT9 in their sophomore, junior or senior years. The class of 1990 was the first to graduate under the HSPT9 standards. The class of 1994 was the last. In the summer of 1989, before the first HSPT9 class had graduated, and certainly before the impact of *this* graduation test could be evaluated, the State Department of Education moved to replace it with two new testing programs: The Eighth Grade Early Warning Test (EWT8) and the Eleventh Grade High School Proficiency Test (HSPT11). These testing programs were developed in large portion because "New Jersey legislators

and many citizens' groups have agreed that the (new tests are) necessary to ensure that students are prepared to participate in an increasingly complex and technological society." (New Jersey Department of Education, 1990).

In March 1991, all eighth graders statewide sat for the first administration of the EWT8. The purpose of this test was to identify students for basic skills remediation, assess the effectiveness of the elementary curriculum, and provide an "early warning" for students in danger of failing the HSPT11. The eighth grade class of 1991 was the first to take the HSPT11 in October 1993. Only those students passing the HSPT11 before June 1995 graduated.

Students attending the Trenton Public Schools were among those who were affected by the new state testing program. This paper follows the Trenton Central High School class of 1995, the first class to graduate under HSPT11 standards. It follows the 732 regularly enrolled eighth graders tested in the spring of 1991 through to the graduation of 295 seniors in June 1995.

The Trenton Public Schools

During 1994-95, the Trenton Public Schools served 12,432 students, pre-kindergarten through grade twelve, in twenty-three schools. The city population is nearly 90,000. During working hours, these numbers swell to include thousands of state workers - most of whom do not live in Trenton, and few of whom send their children to the public schools. Located in Mercer County, the city bares little resemblance to its suburban neighbors. Princeton serves as the best example. Comparing Trenton schools with the remaining Mercer County districts, Trenton accounts for 76% of all African American students and 85% of all Latino students. Most of these children are poor. Ninety-three percent of the children in the county who are eligible for public assistance attend the Trenton Public Schools.

The district was designated one of thirty "Special Needs" districts by the New Jersey State Supreme Court in its opinion on the *Abbott v. Burke* school funding case. The 1990 Quality Education Act, generated by *Abbott*, provided additional resources to these districts at the expense of a record tax increase. That tax increase,

highly unpopular among the 562 non-special needs districts and their municipalities, ultimately led to the governor losing control of both the state senate and assembly; and in November 1993 his own re-election bid. In July 1994, the court found that its ruling in *Abbott* was not met, and ordered the legislature to come up with still another funding plan.

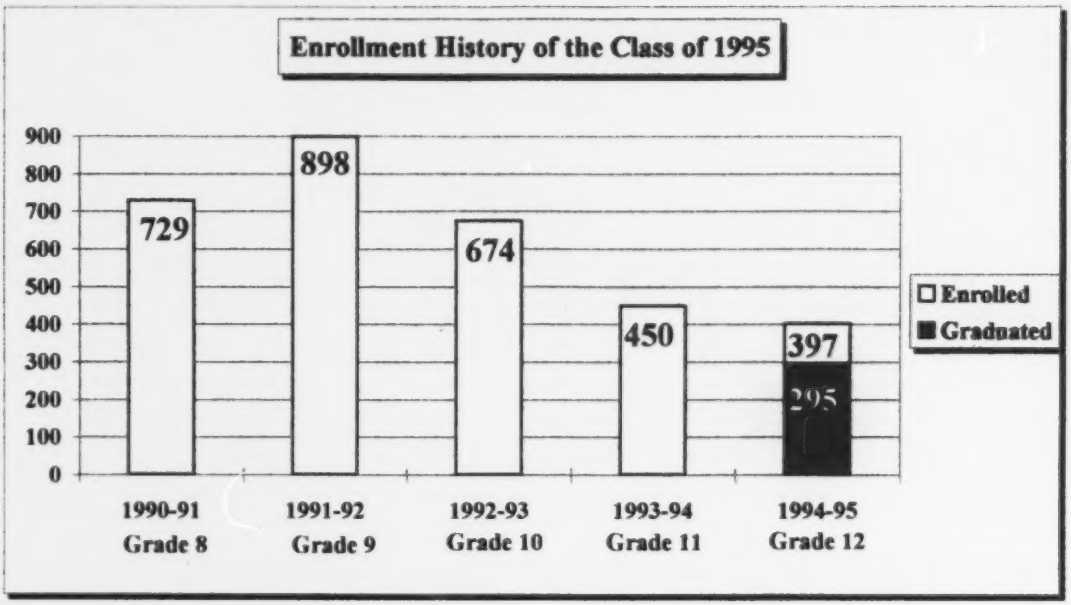
In spite of the additional resources, state certification still eludes most special needs districts (including Trenton). That is, 75% or more of the students have yet to meet state prescribed Minimal Levels of Proficiency on the Metropolitan Achievement Test or the Eighth Grade Early Warning Test (EWT8); nor have 85% of high school juniors or seniors passed the Eleventh Grade High School Proficiency Test (HSPT11).

Identifying the Students: Those Enrolled and Those Tested

In October 1993, Trenton's junior class, the graduating class of 1995, sat for the first administration of the HSPT11. Students unable to pass the test were given additional opportunities to do so in April 1994; October 1994; and April 1995. This same class, as eighth graders in March 1991, was the first to sit for the EWT8. Results of the EWT8 were reported in terms of proficiency levels for Reading, Writing and Mathematics. Students scoring in Proficiency I were judged to be making adequate progress toward passing the HSPT11; Proficiency II students might need additional remediation to pass the HSPT11; Proficiency III students were obligated to receive additional remediation in order to pass the HSPT11. Students scoring in the I or II range were considered to have passed.

> Overall, 732 regularly enrolled students were tested as eighth graders in 1991.
> As eleventh graders, 410 regularly enrolled students were tested.
> As twelfth graders, 295 graduated.
> But of the 295 graduates, only 237 were among the 732 members of the eighth grade class of 1991.

Following Trenton Central High School's Class of 1995



1990-1991

729 grade eight students reported on roll in September, 1990. Students attended one of four grade 7-8 middle schools or one of four grade K-8 elementary schools. Students join other eighth graders statewide as the first class to take the Eighth Grade Early Warning Test (EWT) in March, 1991. The test is designed to identify students at risk of failing the new grade 11 High School Proficiency Test (HSPT).

1991-1992

898 grade nine students enroll as freshmen at Trenton Central High School. The incoming ninth grade class is traditionally larger than the grade eight enrollment as a result of new students entering the high school from parochial and private schools as well as ninth graders from the previous year being retained in grade. These are students who did not take the EWT.

1992-1993

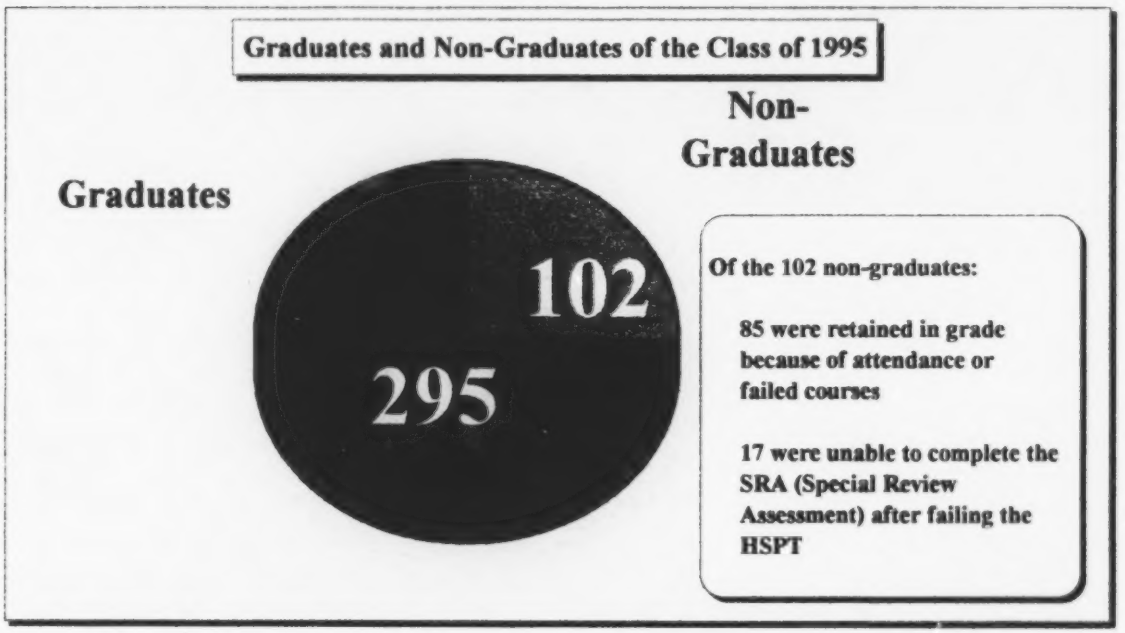
674 grade ten students on roll in September 1992. The enrollment drop is generally attributable to students re-entering private or parochial schools and students dropping out of school upon reaching the age of 16.

1993-1994

450 grade 11 students on roll in September 1993. The enrollment drop is generally attributable to students dropping out or transferring to other schools. Students take the HSPT for the first time in October. Those not passing all three sections are tested again in April.

1994-1995

397 grade twelve students on roll in June 1995. Of that number, 295 receive New Jersey State endorsed diplomas for meeting all requirements for graduation. The remaining 102 students are retained in grade because of poor attendance, course failures and inability to pass all three sections of the HSPT and the Special Review Assessment (SRA). Seventeen of these 102 students met all attendance and course requirements, but were unable to pass the HSPT or the SRA alternative.


Graduates and Non-Graduates of the Class of 1995
Non-Graduates
Graduates
102
295
Of the 102 non-graduates:
85 were retained in grade because of attendance or failed courses
17 were unable to complete the SRA (Special Review Assessment) after failing the HSPT

The Trenton Central High School Class of 1995 can not be considered one group of students who moved together from middle school through their high school years. The mobility of the Trenton students as well as the impact of the state testing programs make grade to grade comparisons difficult. Students entered and left every school year. Predicting graduates in grade 12 based on the scores of eighth graders is particularly difficult in light of this fact.

The Impact of Statt Testing Programs on Trenton's Class of 1995:

March 1991: The first statewide administration of the Eighth Grade Early Warning Test

Number Tested: 732

	Reading	Mathematics	Writing	All Sections
Number Passed	305	222	214	110
Percent Passed	41.6%	30.3%	29.2%	15.0%

April 1995: The cumulative rate of passing for the Eleventh Grade High School Proficiency Test

Number Tested: 410

	Reading	Mathematics	Writing	All Sections
Number Passed	316	302	362	234
Percent Passed	77.1%	73.6%	88.4%	57.1%

All eleventh grade students statewide sat for the HSPT in October, 1993 as juniors. Students unable to pass all three sections of the test were given additional opportunities to pass:

April,1994
October 1994
April 1995

Those students unable to pass were given the opportunity to participate in the SRA, the Special Review Assessment. This alternative to passing the test required students to demonstrate their competency in each skill area.

The Early Warning Test and the High School Proficiency Test

Of the 732 Eighth Grade Students in 1991:

266 students also sat for the HSPT as eleventh grade students

- 182 of these students, 68.4%, passed the HSPT

Of the 410 Students in the Class of 1995 Who Completed the HSPT:

266 students took the EWT as eighth grade students in 1991; and

- 182 of these students, 68.4%, passed the HSPT

144 students came to the district in eleventh or twelfth grade; and

- 52 of these students, 36.1%, passed the HSPT

In all, 234 of 410 members of the Class of 1995, 57.1%, passed the HSPT.

Overall, students who continuously attended the Trenton Public Schools from eighth grade through graduation passed the HSPT at a higher rate than those who came to the district in high school.

From Grade 8 to Graduation:

Which students were tested and when?

How well did the students achieve?

Date and Test	Tested	Passed Number	Passed Percent
March, 1991: Grade 8 EWT	732	110	15.0%
April, 1995: Grade 11&12 HSPT	410	234	57.1%

Of the 732 students who completed the EWT as eighth graders, only 266 remained to complete the HSPT in eleventh grade. 466 eighth graders in 1991 *never* made it to Trenton High School to take the HSPT.

The 732 Trenton Students who Completed the EWT in 1991

Never took the HSPT in Trenton

Took the EWT and the HSPT

Of the 732 students who completed the EWT in grade 8:

266, or 36.3% remained in the Trenton Public Schools to take the HSPT.

466, or 63.7% left the district before taking the HSPT in eleventh grade.

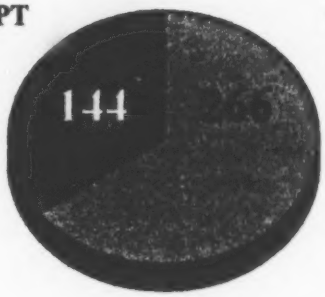
Students who completed the EWT in the Trenton Public Schools passed the HSPT at a far greater rate than those students who came from outside the district

Of the 410 students in the Class of 1995 completing the High School Proficiency Test at Trenton High School, 266 were enrolled as eighth graders in Trenton schools and took the Early Warning Test as eighth graders. 144 students came to the high school from outside the district.

The 410 Trenton Students in the Class of 1995 Completing the HSPT

Took the HSPT only

52 of these students passed: 36.1%



Took the EWT and the HSPT

182 of these students passed: 68.4%

Of the 410 students who completed the HSPT at Trenton High School:

266, or 64.9% completed the EWT in Trenton.

144, or 35.1% took the HSPT but not the EWT.

The Early Warning Test as a Predictor for the High School Proficiency Test

The EWT was initially intended to predict whether students were making academic progress sufficient to ensure they could pass the HSPT in eleventh grade. Students were tested in Reading, Mathematics and Writing. Results show that:

For 182 students who passed the HSPT who also took the EWT:

	Reading		Mathematics		Writing	
EWT Prediction	N	%	N	%	N	%
will pass	122	67.0%	93	51.1%	89	48.9%
will not pass	60	33.0%	89	48.9%	93	51.1%

For 81 students who passed the HSPT the first time and who also took the EWT:

	Reading		Mathematics		Writing	
EWT Prediction	N	%	N	%	N	%
will pass	69	85.2%	64	79.1%	57	70.4%
will not pass	12	14.8%	17	20.9%	24	29.6%

For 101 students who passed the HSPT after the first time and who also took the EWT:

	Reading		Mathematics		Writing	
EWT Prediction	N	%	N	%	N	%
will pass	53	52.5%	29	28.7%	32	31.7%
will not pass	48	47.5%	72	71.3%	69	68.3%

For 84 students who did not pass the HSPT and who also took the EWT:

	Reading		Mathematics		Writing	
EWT Prediction	N	%	N	%	N	%
will pass	13	15.5%	7	8.3%	10	11.9%
will not pass	71	84.5%	77	91.7%	74	88.1%

The EWT served as the best predictor for those 81 students who passed the HSPT for the first time in eleventh grade. The test was also a good predictor for those students who were unable to pass the HSPT.

It is critical to note that with additional academic supports in grades nine, ten and eleven, 68.4% of students who took the EWT in grade eight passed the HSPT prior to leaving Trenton High School.

Trenton Central High School Graduates:

From 729 students in grade eight, to 295 graduates in grade 12:

> **239 of these graduates eventually passed the HSPT or an SRA**

> **56 of these graduates were not tested on the HSPT**

- **10 graduated after passing the HSPT9 and being retained in grade from the class of 1994**
- **15 were Special Education students exempt from testing**
- **14 were Limited English Proficient and exempted from the HSPT**
- **17 were retained in grade in 1994 and had to make up coursework; these students had already passed the HSPT9**

Of the 295 Trenton Graduates

> **237 were in Trenton schools in Grade 8 during 1990-91**

> **58 came to Trenton High School from outside the district**

Of the 729 Trenton Eighth graders in 1990-1991

> **32.5% actually graduated in 1995**

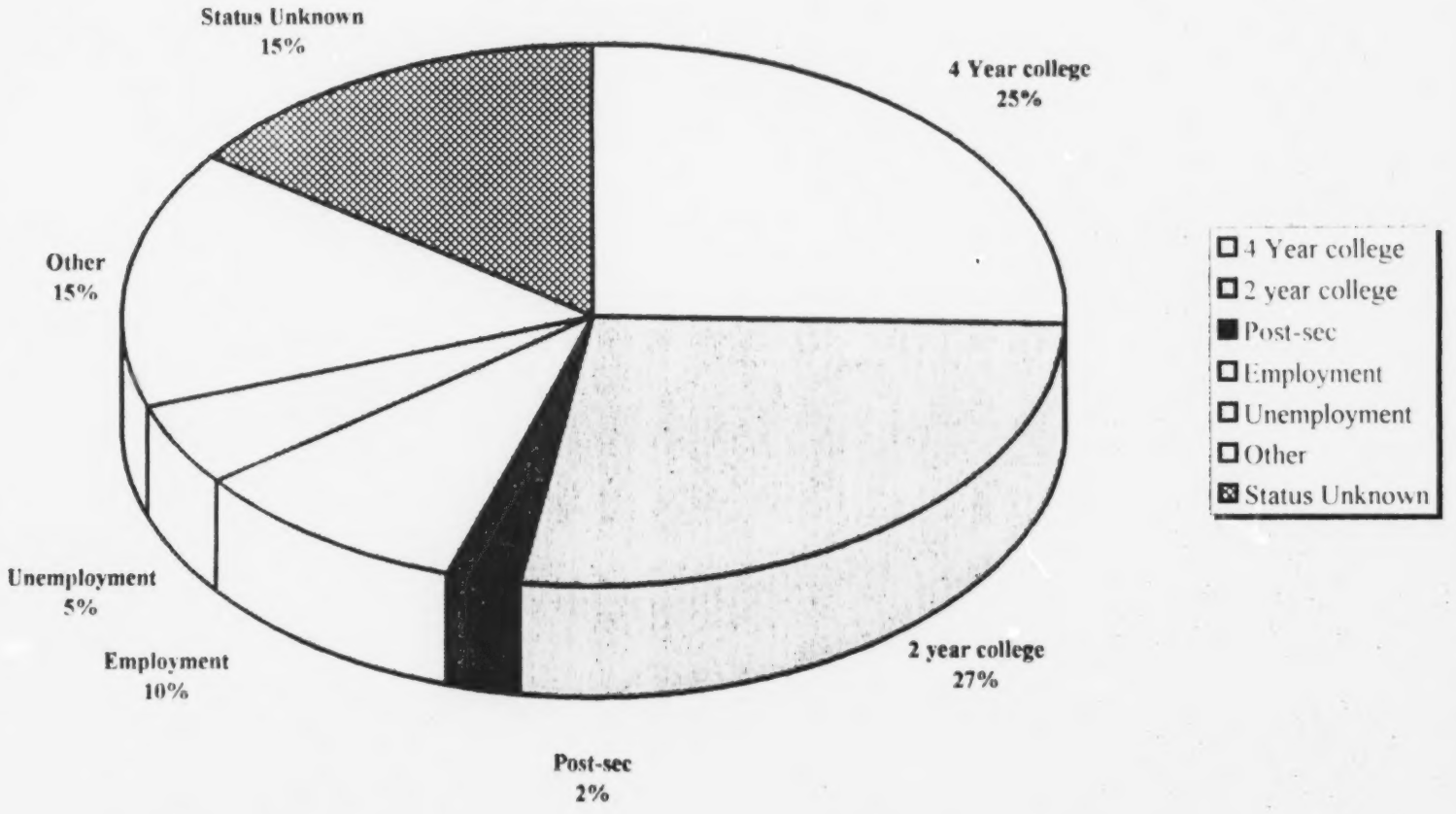
Of the 144 students who came to the High school from outside the district

> **40.3% actually graduated in 1995**

Graduation plans as reported by the Class of 1995:

> **25% were accepted at four year colleges**
> **27% were accepted at two year community colleges**
> **2% were enrolled in some other secondary program**
> **10% were employed**
> **5% were looking for employment**
> **15% were in the military or some other program**
> **15% were unknown**

Graduation Plans: Trenton Central High School Class of 1995



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Post Graduation Plans Trenton High School Class of 1995*

	White		Black		Hispanic		Am. Indian		Asian		All Graduates		Total Grads		
Plans	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total	In-State	Out-State
4 Year college	0	1	31	37	4	1	0	0	1	0	36	39	75	43	32
2 year college	1	1	27	34	1	14	0	0	2	0	31	49	80	77	3
Other college	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Post-sec	1	0	3	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	3	7		
Employment	2	0	12	12	2	1	0	0	0	0	16	13	29		
Unemployment	1	0	5	3	3	3	0	0	0	0	9	6	15		
Other	1	0	20	21	2	3	0	0	0	0	23	24	47		
Status Unknown	3	1	20	31	8	1	0	0	0	0	31	33	64		
TOTAL	9	3	118	140	20	24	0	0	3	0	150	167	317	120	35

* Based on Counselor's data prior to graduation, 317 graduates anticipated

Post Graduation Plans Trenton High School Class of 1995#

	White		Black		Hispanic		Am. Indian		Asian		All Graduates		Total Grads		
Plans	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total	In-State	Out-State
4 Year college	0	1	31	37	4	1	0	0	1	0	36	39	75	43	32
2 year college	1	1	27	34	1	14	0	0	2	0	31	49	80	77	3
Other college	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Post-sec	1	0	3	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	3	7		
Employment	2	0	12	12	2	1	0	0	0	0	16	13	29		
Unemployment	1	0	5	3	3	3	0	0	0	0	9	6	15		
Other	1	0	20	21	2	1	0	0	0	0	23	22	45		
Status Unknown	3	1	11	21	7	1	0	0	0	0	21	23	44		
TOTAL	9	3	109	130	19	22	0	0	3	0	140	155	295	120	35

Based on graduation data (276) plus 19 Summer School grads, = 295

What was done to improve instruction and achievement?

Additional funding as a Special Needs District

Curriculum Alignment to new State Standards for the EWT and the HSPT

Practice Testing

Additional Basic Skills Classes Before and After School

Staff training

School based planning teams as a part of the state required *Educational Improvement Planning* Process

Additional Guidance Counselors and other Student Support Services

But in spite of the supports, many students still left the district prior to graduation; most as transfers to other school districts.

September 1994 to June 1995 Trenton Central High School Leaver and Dropout Statistics by Reason

Code	Reason	Total	*Student Enrollment Regular	Special Ed
D-3	Physical, mental, emotional disability	0	0	0
D-4	Dissatisfied with school	9	7	2
D-5	Economic necessity/entered employment	5	5	0
D-6	Married and or pregnant	3	3	0
D-7	New Residence, school status unknown	17	15	2
D-8	Reason unknown	159	143	16
	Total Dropouts	*193*	*173*	*20*
D-1	Expulsion	0	0	0
D-2	Incarceration	4	2	2
D-9	Death of a Student	1	1	0
T-2	Transfer to another Trenton public school	124	100	24
T-3	Transfer to non-public school in state	11	11	0
T-4	Transfer to public school out of district	474	384	90
T-5	Transfer to individual instruction record	35	26	9
T-8	Transfer to school out of state or country	1	1	0
	Total	*843*	*698*	*145*

* The majority of school leavers are regularly enrolled students. As of the end of June, only 20 of 193 dropouts (10.4%) were classified students.

The Annual Dropout Percentage is computed by the following formula:

$$\text{Dropouts} = \frac{\text{(School Leavers - Transfers to Other Schools)}}{\text{September Enrollment}}$$

Dropout Rate as of the End of June

	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95
September Enrollment	2847	2897	2557
Number Dropped to Date	411	301	193
Dropout Rate	14.4%	10.4%	7.5%

Perspective and Educational Importance

The perspective of this paper was intended to be both practical and theoretical. Practically, the paper provided a longitudinal analysis of student data from the Trenton Public Schools which linked the state's two high stakes testing programs; those high stakes state tests administered to the class of 1995, the EWT8 and HSPT.

There was a direct link between success on the EWT and the ability to pass the HSPT. But perhaps more critical was the finding that it may be inappropriate to even draw such comparisons. In point of fact, the majority of the students who took the EWT as eighth graders did not make it through to graduation - at least not in Trenton, and very likely not in too many other Special Needs districts in New Jersey either.

For the school district, these findings should be cause for some concern. Trenton, like 29 other Special Needs districts, is evaluated based on its test scores and the quality of its graduates. Student mobility makes it increasingly more difficult for the district to provide consistent educational services to its high school students. The state's monitoring process, rather than acknowledging this obvious finding, actually punishes these districts because of it.

This study was presented from the point of view of the local district as it provided a thorough analysis the impact of high stakes testing on the class of 1995. But is has a good deal of relevance for the New Jersey State Department of Education as well. It provides an evaluation of the EWT as a predictor of success on the HSPT.

The educational importance of this paper is three fold. First, in terms of educational improvement in the local district, Trenton. What the district is able to learn from the longitudinal analysis of the class of 1995, the first to graduate under HSPT11 standards, is important to document.

Second, in terms of the state department's model of the EWT as an early warning for graduation as measured by the HSPT. This study also served to evaluate, and perhaps to validate the state's model for using the EWT as a predictor

of success on the HSPT11 - at least in the Trenton schools.

And third, in terms of the national move toward high stakes testing programs and state assessment and monitoring programs. Surely, there are lessons to be learned by other states considering high stakes graduation tests for its seniors - the most important being that those students identified early on as needing additional services to graduate from high school *may not be* those students who actually survive through high school to graduation.